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Using the “Protocols”: Fallacies and rhetorical strategies

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ABSTRACT: In our contribution we will analyze the way the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are used by anti-Semite or anti-Zionist propaganda. We will try to show how persuasive manipulation systematically violates the «pragma-dialectical rules for reasonable discussion» (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004). In destroying the possibility of a fair discussion, such strategies are particularly effective in persuading not the other party of a dialectical discussion but the target-audience of this «forbidden rhetoric».

KEYWORDS: anti-Semitism, argument schemes, conspiracy theories, fallacies, forbidden rhetoric manipulation, plot, pragma-dialectics, Protocols of the Elders of Zion, violation of the rules.

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were probably written between the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX century by the *ochrana*, the tsarist political police, or by people belonging to the extreme right-wing Russian milieu. It is one of the most notorious plagiarisms, since nearly all topics and formulations have been practically copied from a today maybe less known book by Maurice Joly, *Dialogues aux Enfers* (1864), which was written against Napoleon III: Machiavelli and Montesquieu meet in Hell, the first arguing as a representative of Napoleon’s authoritarian regime, the second for the Republic. The text was then integrated with passages from anti-Semitic cheap literature and ideas taken from tsarist Russian subculture. The result: a text in which the two different positions of Machiavelli and Montesquieu are merged in a speech given by the leader of the pretended Jewish conspiracy, where both democracy and tyranny, communism and capitalism, weapons of all kinds including, above all, money and the press are nothing more than instruments of the conspiracy.

The *Protocols* later became a real *vade mecum* for National Socialism and for anti-Semites all over the world. Though a fictitious document, it was considered as authentic, and all refutations conducted with a historical method have been dismissed as a part of the conspiracy. The beginning was of course the huge campaign made by Henry Ford during the Twenties, but it was in Nazi-Germany that they became part of national education and required reading in all classes.

The history of the text and its diffusion has been accurately studied by authors like Segel (1924) and Cohn (1967), who have found the sources which were used in order to cobble together this text; Umberto Eco (1994) has shown the Franco-German literary

Gilardoni, A. (2009). Using the “Protocols”: Fallacies and rhetorical strategies. In: J. Ritola (Ed.), *Argument Cultures: Proceedings of OSSA 09*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-11), Windsor, ON: OSSA.

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history of the plagiarism: Barruel, Simonini, Dumas, Sue, Goedsche and Joly; in France, Taguieff (1989) edited a two-volume work where he analysed the argumentative strategies and the history of the effects of the Protocols, which according to him were more important than the accurate reconstruction of the text's origins. Partly revising these conclusions, two recent Italian monographs by De Michelis (2001; 2004²) reconstruct the history and the probable original version of the *Protocols*, which according to him (and his philological analysis of various versions of the text) has XX century tsarist Russia as its birth place instead of Paris.

2. SEEING A PLOT EVERYWHERE

Nowadays, the myth of the conspiracy still serves as an effective instrument for ideological propaganda, not only in the Muslim world, where it is useful for Israel-hate (there exist soap-operas on the Zionist-plot); also in the Western world the conspiracy theories seem to represent the key to explaining all the evils of the world. Hate speech exploits and produces stereotypes and distorted images, substitutes the complexity of reality, which may be difficult to decipher, with a super-reality which is more coherent, more understandable and consists in a monocausal, obsessive explanation. For instance, former president George W. Bush and the C.I.A. are claimed to be entangled in the collapse of the Twin Towers, no plane is said to have collided with the Pentagon, the moon landing is supposed to be a big lie, the financial crisis is suspected to have been directed by some “wire pullers.” In the background, the recurrent scheme is always the same: the Jews (or “Zionist,” if one does not want to be taken for an anti-Semite) are supposed to be “the wire pullers.”

On the basis of this well-known “paranoid” thinking scheme, the principle of suspicion spreads like an epidemic: it needs no proof. On the contrary, the absence of a proof or of a warrant is intended as a proof of the truth of the advanced standpoint (if a *standpoint* and not at all a sort of quasi-religious *illumination* is put forward), and the possible arguments advanced to support the contrasting standpoint are used to reinforce one's own attitude.

3. FALLACIES AND TYPICAL ARGUMENT SCHEMES

The conspiracy obsession depicts as apparently acceptable also patently unsound reasoning and evident fallacies *used as arguments* (Benz 2009; Pisanty 2006): (1) the *shifting of the burden of proof*: “Why should I demonstrate the existence of a conspiracy? You have to show that there is no conspiracy!”; (2) a (false) *dilemma*: “Either there are the proofs of the conspiracy or there aren't; if there are any, then the conspiracy exists; but if there aren't any, then, nevertheless and *a fortiori*, the conspiracy exists, because Jews are able to hide everything; therefore the conspiracy exists in any case”; (3) the *reversal* of the *cause-effect relation* (also in a *temporal* sense) or (4) of the relation between victim and perpetrators: “In Russia, the hostility against Jews has its roots in the fact that many Jews were members of the revolutionary parties”; (5) the ambiguity in the use of the terms, which can more easily become a *petitio principii*: “If the *Protocols* as we know them are a fake, then the original documents must exist, i.e. the authentic *Protocols*, which have been plagiarized, *therefore*, the conspiracy exists”; (6) a list of

facts (revolutions, financial crisis, famine, etc.) which are intended to demonstrate *ad abundantiam* that the conspiracy really exists, shifting also (7) from the question of how to demonstrate the *authenticity* of the *Protocols* to the apodictical certainty that the *Protocols* say the *truth* about the conspiracy and therefore are authentic too because they are proved by historical events; (8) the appeal to the *argumentum ad verecundiam* (the authority being the Koran, a testimony, a presumed expert, maybe Hitler himself, the anti-Semitic Catholic magazine “Civiltà cattolica,” rumours which aim at dehumanizing the enemy), maybe together with (9) an *argumentum ad baculum*, for instance in the case of a doorkeeper in Berlin quoted by Benz (2007: Chapter 2), who asserts that the Jews had once hidden all sugar in Egypt: “As I asked for a reason, he got offended: to cast doubt upon what he said meant to insult him and his mother, the authority from which the anecdote came, since the doorkeeper was still a child at the time of the assumed events.” (10) In general, *the refusal to adopt any* (philological, scientific, historical, etc.) *criteria to establish the truth*, asserting on the contrary that “this is a method invented by the Jews” and appealing to a “superior” (not intellectual) knowledge.

All readers will have noticed, that, strictly speaking, it is the one who advances the standpoint of the existence of a conspiracy, that also has to prove what he or she asserts. And this should be done without falsifying documents and statements (1). Moreover, in order to underline how absurd it is to pretend (2) to be a demonstration, one could reverse the dilemma, arguing that, if there is no proof, then, there is no conspiracy, while, if the proof is given, and it is a false one, then a fortiori, there is no conspiracy at all and an assumed conspiracy is nothing but paranoia. The model of “abusive rhetoric” (Eco 2006) as shown in (3) has the same structure of the well studied effects of east-European anti-Semitism: a lot of Jews tried to join revolutionary movements because they hoped their human, civil and political rights to be recognised and guaranteed. On the contrary, Nazis, old and new ones, pretended and pretend that the assumed conspiracy provoked anti-Semitism and persecutions (a recent example can be found in Riga’s Museum of National History). The worst: The legitimate refutation of a plagiarism advanced by those who are victims of anti-Semitism and prejudices is taken as a part of the persecution against the editors of the *Protocols*. But this is the well-known technique of *reframing* (or, in Copi and Cohen’s words, a “persuasive definition”), which can also be found in (4), where the role of victims and perpetrators are confused: if the reaction against the persecutions is interpreted as an offence, this reinforces the belief in the conspiracy. The belief is finally immunized against refutations (“it is as I say, and that’s all”) with a *petitio principii* or a *circulus in probando* (circular reasoning): the ones who try to refute the standpoint of the existence of a conspiracy following the rules of the scientific method are considered to be themselves part of the conspiracy (see 10).

Coming now to (5), it should be noted that a “fake” document is not a “copy” of the original one (like a painting by Rembrandt, so that the original one really exists) but a *forgery* which is pretended to be the faithful report of the meeting of the conspirators (that in reality has never taken place). Here we have for instance the distinction advanced by Preziosi in the 1921 edition of the *Protocols*: through the technique of dissociation he declared the problem of the authenticity to be superfluous, since (according to him) the question actually was: are they truthful? Does the conspiracy exist? But the two questions (i.e., authenticity and truthfulness) are linked (Pisanty 2006): before we decide if a document is truthful we must also decide if it is authentic or a fake. If the sources are not

sure, or untrustworthy, if the text is a hodgepodge made out of parts of novels, then also the truthfulness of the content is weakened. And since the documentation of the authenticity does not exist, Preziosi (1921) tries to concentrate on their assumed truthfulness and pretends to prove it through the historical events that followed the supposed writing of the report (see 6). In a similar way, Julius Evola, a well known inspirer of Italian “spiritual” racism, in his introduction to the 1938 edition, succeeds in changing the meaning of the word “authenticity.” He proposes to use an inductive procedure to determine whether or not the conspiracy exists, but actually he presupposes the existence of it on the basis of “Jewish nature,” i.e., the “International Judaism” (for a deeper analysis of Evola’s devices and moves see Pisanty 2006).

Also the connection between Jews and disasters like wars and revolutions (6) has to be proved, but it is on the contrary only assumed and strengthened through a list of events which should prove the cause (i.e., the conspiracy) starting from the effects. This procedure aims to orient the attention to some typical Jewish names (of those who are part of the bolshevik and menshevik parties, for instance), like in a typical paranoia, until you see Jews everywhere. We can find here two interacting fallacies: *petitio principii* (as already seen) and *affirming the consequent*: if the conspiracy exists, then the events could derive from it, but the events in themselves could have *other reasons or causes*.

The skilled reader will also notice that in (8) and (9) we find the *pathos* technique: here, we are not confronted with arguments but with some “strategic manoeuvring” intended to prevent the discussion from taking place. The performative function of language is here exploited: words *are* actions. The tone or the volume of the voice, the writing style, the allusions, the usage of inverted commas (“...”), the spin of some terms are here the usual devices. Also a quotation from Hitler (see the Italian edition of 1938) can serve this purpose, functioning as an appeal to an “expert” or an authority but also to repeat rumours. If the receiver (the reader or the listener) is someone who already believes in the Jewish world-conspiracy, this device serves to strengthen the belief and to move to action, though they neither serve to prove the truthfulness of the informations nor the authenticity of the document.

Finally in (10), and this point represents an overview of all previous observations, logical reasoning and the scientific method of historians and philologists (even of detectives) show their serious limitations, since they are ineffective against those who do not intend to apply them, i.e., do not intend to *bear the burden of proof* and instead use the technique of suspicion. Moreover, if they are rejected as ruses by those who are intended to be the conspirators, *any basis for a critical discussion* with those who believe or advance the standpoint that there actually is a conspiracy *becomes impossible*. But this was exactly our starting point.

4. HOW TO DISTINGUISH ARGUMENTATION FROM MANIPULATION: A CRITERION

From what precedes, we have seen that those whose purpose is the demonstration of the truthfulness of the *Protocols* take for granted the existence of the conspiracy. Therefore, if we argue that on the basis of a philological or critical method their reasoning is not sound (Evola, for instance, anticipates this objection), they refuse the objection saying that the scientific principles are part of the Jewish conspiracy (i.e., what they call

“pseudo-science” is an “original sin” which affects every discussion). Therefore, we see that a reasonable discussion or even a dispute is not only impossible but also undesired, since the purpose of conspiracy-theorists is to strengthen the conviction of those who are more or less already on their side.

Obviously, we are confronted with some formal fallacies such as the *non sequitur*, and we could analyse thousands of fallacies, but our intent here is a different one: like the actors of the Italian Commedia dell’Arte (which we could call, here, The Comedy of Suspicions) we want to improvise on the basis of a canvas (it. *canovaccio*) in order to find the right answers for what we suppose is a violation of discussion rules. It is actually possible to use the “Code of conduct for reasonable discussants” (in ten commandments or rules) proposed by pragma-dialectical theory (Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, pp. 190-195; for reasons due to our exposition of the fallacies we do not follow here the same order). Why? Because the ten commandments are used for manipulative purposes by the conspiracy-theorists, only, instead of the form “you may not,” we have to read “you shall.” Each rule is then a suggestion for the usage of manipulative devices.

I — *The general language use rule* — Discussants may not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they may not deliberately misinterpret the other party’s formulations.

II — *The freedom rule* — Discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into doubt.

III — *The obligation-to-defend (or burden of proof) rule* — Discussants who advance a standpoint may not refuse to defend this standpoint when requested to do so.

IV — *The unexpressed-premise-rule* — Discussants may not falsely attribute unexpressed premises to the other party, nor disown responsibility for their own unexpressed premises.

V — *Standpoint rule* — Attacks on standpoints may not bear on a standpoint that has not actually been put forward by the other party.

VI — *Starting-point-rule* — Discussants may not falsely present something as an accepted starting point or falsely deny that something is an accepted starting point.

VII — *The relevance rule* — Standpoints may not be defended by non-argumentation or argumentation that is not relevant to the standpoint.

VIII — *The validity rule* — Reasoning that is an argumentation is presented as formally conclusive may not be invalid in a logical sense.

IX — *The argument-scheme rule* — Standpoints may not be regarded as conclusively defended by argumentation that is not presented as based on formally conclusive reasoning if that defense does not take place by means of appropriate argument schemes that are applied correctly.

X — *The concluding rule* — Inconclusive defenses of standpoints may not lead to maintaining these standpoints, and conclusive defenses of standpoints may not lead to maintaining expressions of doubt concerning these standpoints.

5. THE REVERSAL

If we now consider the ten commandments not as *dialectical* rules (a code of conduct for reasonable discussants) but from a *rhetorical* point of view (i.e. from the point of view of a “forbidden rhetoric”), they can be intended as techniques and strategies which have persuasive and manipulative purposes. In that sense, Perelman’s and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s position (as is explained in *The New Rhetoric*, where they suggest taking into account *the effect on the audience* for the definition of rhetoric) can interact with pragma-dialectics through the distinction between *illocutionary* (assertives, commissives, directives etc.) and *perlocutionary* force (persuasiveness) as it was developed by Searle (1969). The violation of the ten rules is nothing else than the description of the manipulative techniques as seen in a mirror.

Anti-Semites, and those who propagate the contagion of the *Protocols*, use ambiguous and allusive formulations, willingly misinterpret, and quote other parties out of context. In doing so, they commit the fallacy of the *straw man* and violate the *general language use rule*.

They prevent the other party from advancing or casting doubts on the standpoint of what we will call *authenticity* (i.e., the grounded opinion, that the text of the *Protocols* is a genuine transcription of the meetings of the Elders of Zion and not a plagiarism) and shift the question to the problem of *truthfulness* (the real existence of revolutions, wars, etc., and *therefore* of the Jewish world-conspiracy). The critical observations against authenticity are *thus* used as a proof of the real existence of the conspiracy, to which, they claim, the other party belongs (because he or she casts doubt on the authenticity of the document using a typical “Jewish,” i.e., critical and scientific method). Obviously, in doing so, they violate the *freedom rule* through typical arguments *ad personam* (or abusive *ad hominem* arguments) like insinuations or personal attacks, appeal to assumed experts (*ad verecundiam* fallacy), pathos, rumors, and so on.

They also escape or evade *the burden of proof rule* in relation to the problem of authenticity. In general, refusing to use any analytical method (philological, scientific, historical and so on), sometimes *simulating* a scientific attitude but in the end accusing the other party, as already said, to be bound to a typical “Jewish” (i.e. critical) method.

They falsely attribute to the other party (the Jews who are considered the conspirators) *unexpressed premises* while refusing to call their own standpoint into question. The unexpressed premises can often be even considered as the repetition of the standpoint (fallacy of *petitio principii*), though they are not recognized as such.

As we already said, the attacks of the anti-Semites are often against a comfortable opponent (*straw man*), but they are mainly *personal* attacks, and therefore a diversionary tactic, because the standpoint of the other party is not taken into consideration, or refused as superfluous or pointless, if not misused for their own purposes. To formulate this point in a paradoxical way: if one asserts that the *Protocols* are authentic and truthful, and the “Jews” say that it isn’t so, then the critical answer is interpreted as “improper” (or pathetic), thus taken as a proof of authenticity and truthfulness, and therefore ideally proving that the conspiracy exists.

A lot of the assertions which serve as a basis to reinforce the belief in the authenticity and truthfulness of the *Protocols*, for instance the standpoint of the “overrepresentation” of the Jews in some fields (say finance, culture, press and so on), are

nothing but an evocation of the traditional prejudices (the origin of which can be explained in a different way, without appealing to the *petitio principii* of the conspiracy). Such prejudices are shared by anti-Semites, but not by Jews or by those who think we should use scientific criteria. Therefore, this is a violation of the *starting point rule*, since it is not accepted by the other party that Jews are overrepresented in the communist party or in the banks, etc., but through allusions, winks, and abusive generalisation (inductive or statistical fallacy) it is presented as if it were.

The violation of the *pertinence rule* is evident in argumentation like: It doesn't matter if you demonstrate the authenticity of the document, since it is enough to demonstrate its truthfulness. But those who ask to demonstrate that the text has really been written by a group of Jew conspirators and not by some anti-Semites (for this second hypothesis we would have some proof, indeed) asks something which is preliminary to the demonstration of the Jew conspiracy (truthfulness) or to the mere possibility of it. The two questions are heterogeneous but are closely related.

Since we are neither in the field of formal logic nor in the sphere of correct argumentation, it should not surprise us that, given the absence of an agreement on the scientific method, also the necessity of respecting *the validity rule* falls with it. We are thus confronted with fallacies such as *affirming the consequent* (if there is a Jewish conspiracy, then there is a Russian revolution, but there has been a Russian revolution, therefore, there was and there is a Jewish conspiracy) or *denying the antecedent* (if there is a proof of the non-authenticity of the *Protocols*, then the text is not authentic, but the proof is not given, therefore, the text is authentic). The fallacy of denying the antecedent can also be interpreted as an *argumentum ad ignorantiam* (in this case, it falls under 9).

Also the usual criteria for the evaluation of generalisations and causal relations (for instance John Stuart Mill's) or for the evaluation of the statistical generalisations are not accepted. In general, we are confronted with techniques based on *ethos* or *pathos*. The *argument schemes* (and therefore not only formal logic) are applied incorrectly, unfairly or in manipulative ways.

Since anti-Semites think that the proofs refuting the standpoint of authenticity (of the *Protocols*) and the proofs demonstrating the truthfulness (of the conspiracy) represent only a confirmation of the authenticity or of the truthfulness, the concluding *rule* is also violated or reversed: the evidence is denied and the false continually reaffirmed.

6. CONCLUSION

We (hope to) have also shown, that the ten pragma-dialectical rules can be used as a criterion to distinguish and systematically analyse the manipulative techniques used in the propaganda for the *Protocols*. To counter them, and to do so convincingly, is a different question.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I wish to thank Sarah Bigi, Maurizio Ghiretti, Valentina Pisanty and Karin Birge Gilardoni-Büch for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper and for our fruitful discussions on the strategies of anti-Semitism. I thank Sarah Bigi and Claudia Carlos also for their accurate revision of the text.

[Link to commentary](#)

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